

Wallpapers at St Pancras Chambers

Dr Lynda Skipper, Lecturer in Conservation and Restoration, University of Lincoln

The refurbishment of St Pancras Chambers (formerly the Midland Grand Hotel), which re-opened as a hotel in 2011, provided a unique opportunity to investigate the wallpapers used in this historic commercial property, spanning a period of just over 100 years.

In 1866 George Gilbert Scott won the competition to design a new hotel in St Pancras for Midland Rail. In 1872 Frederick Sang, a German born decorator, was awarded the contract for the interior decoration of the east wing of the hotel¹. Although the decoration was generally admired, many of the estimates were being exceeded, and the decoration of the west wing was given to Gillow & Co in 1874. This was a commercial firm who had previously supplied the furniture for the east wing of the hotel. The furnishings of the hotel on the upper floors were much more modest than those on the lower floors, reflecting the hierarchy of uses of the building, with servants based in the attic rooms and the most prestigious rooms on the ground floor. While it seemed likely that wallpapers were chosen to also reflect this cost gradient, the refurbishment of the hotel provided an opportunity to investigate this.

The original ledger for the Hotel clearly shows the use of wallpapers. For example, Gillow's account (1875-1877) shows "...papering walls with a gold ground bird pattern french paper"². This is however unusually specific in terms of design, and the majority of wallpapers mentioned by Gillow & Co are simply denoted as "Hanging own paper & providing & hanging borders"³. A list in Sang's accounts, which is more detailed than that given by Gillow, contains mention of 7 different William Morris designs.

A total of 99 different designs were retrieved from the hotel, including a William Morris Venetian pattern paper. Excitingly, Venetian is mentioned by both Gillows, the only wallpaper named in their accounts, and by Sang. There were also papers identified as being designed by Owen Jones and Bruce Talbert. Clearly with a project of this importance and significance the use of prestigious designers was important. On the lower floor, although many of the early designs found were floral, the patterns were generally much larger, often containing gold, and overall papers did conform to a cost gradient. In corridors and stairways, some papers were varnished to make them more hard-wearing.

There were a number of alterations carried out within the building while it was in use as a hotel until 1935, and evidence of the earliest papers was quite sparse, indicating many had been stripped off in redecoration schemes. Most of the surviving pieces were found when partition walls or ducting was removed. There were a number of papers from the slightly later hotel era, in addition to some from when the hotel was used as offices and staff accommodation (1935 - 1985). All these papers have been cleaned and conserved, and form a wallpaper archive available for access at the University of Lincoln.

¹ Simmons, J. and Thorne, R. (2003). *St. Pancras Station*, 2nd ed. London: Historical publications.

² Midland Grand Hotel London. Inventory of furniture, fittings, &c. (Copies of tradesmans bills). National Railway Museum archives, York. 2003-8600

³ *Ibid.*

Figures:



The author retrieving wallpaper from St Pancras Chambers.



William Morris Venetian pattern wallpaper as found in situ when a partition wall was removed. Another fragment of paper can be seen either side of it.